

Dealing with stress

What you can do when the pressure's on

Feeling stressed out? You're not alone – technology, business, and the shrinking of our global village has changed the way people live their lives and the way work is done. Often, we are expected to do more with less – at home, in our personal lives, and at work.

Sometimes you have the ability to change elements of your environment to reduce the 'stressors' in your life – but other times the larger situation is out of your control and you can be left feeling overwhelmed and, well, stressed!

JSC is no different. It's no secret that the agency as a whole has faced downsizing right along with the rest of corporate America. However, as owners of the miracle of space flight, we are faced with a huge responsibility of ensuring the very best of technology, safety, and mission assurance, without compromise, despite the challenges.

It's those challenges that can wreak havoc on our workforce in the form of stress.

Positive stress is a good thing. Some people thrive on it. It motivates us, challenges us, and helps us grow.

On the other hand, negative stress, however legitimate, can cause people to lose perspective and have serious effects on not only job satisfaction and personal well-being, but, on a larger scale, can impact productivity, quality, and even safety.

For any of those reasons, acquiring methods to deal with your own stress should be a priority. Whether you think you have a lot or a little, it does affect you, your work, and, likely, people around you.

Many people around the center have faced stress, either here or elsewhere, and developed their own personal ways to cope.

"The key to my coping is taking a minute to breathe," says Jeanne Newman, IMPASS Public Affairs Services manager. "And I do mean taking several deep, long breaths. It helps me put the situation in perspective, assigns it a priority, and provides an opportunity to refocus my energy into identifying options. Too often we get spun up in a knee-jerk reaction and actually create our own stress because we haven't taken the time to step back and put things into perspective."

Sound simple? Yes, but even Newman says it takes a conscious effort if the situation is starting to snowball, so she uses several techniques to force herself to take that minute to breathe and step back. One technique is to take a walk around the JSC ponds.

"The physical activity helps burn up some adrenaline and the beauty of the landscape helps put things in perspective," says Newman. "I also keep things in my



Jeanne Newman uses a few well-placed toys and soothing décor in her office to help to create a calming, anti-stress atmosphere. She also keeps a miniature Zen rock garden close by to help her "slow down" when things begin to snowball.

Recognizing what you can and cannot control, and learning to let go of what you don't have control over is very important in managing stress.

– Jackie Reese

office to help give me that calmness such as a Zen rock garden (she insists raking designs in the sand does help), a few toys, and a serene beach painting. At home, I garden which provides physical activity, a sense of accomplishment, and 'alone time' to step

back from the problem at hand.

"The bottom line for me is to give myself time to make a conscious choice on how I want to react, rather than reacting for the sake of reacting," adds Newman.

Other managers note that some people let things build up that they shouldn't and don't take any steps until it becomes problematic. Rather, they should learn how to better balance their life including not only work and family, but also hobbies, faith, and friends in and away from the workplace.

"I do a lot of listening and encourage folks to leave it behind them, to go home and come back to fight another day," said Milt Heflin, deputy chief, Flight Director Office. "I think each manager needs to stand back and recognize that the environment we work in is different than it was 20 years ago, and employees need to recognize that working with international partners will present new challenges. To lower our stress, we need to accept that and learn as individuals how to deal with it. Whatever adds to your stress that you can fix, fix it. What you can't

fix, learn to deal with so it won't drive you nuts. Taking the time to know the difference, and getting help to decide, can be critical."

To help with that, many managers have arranged for seminars with stress experts for their employees. Heflin worked through



JSC's Elizabeth Hall and Jackie Reese help lead JSC's Stress Management Initiative.

JSC's Employee Assistance Program Office for a special presentation to his staff.

"We're made up of Type AA people," said Heflin. "It's in their nature. They're selected by NASA to be the leaders in Mission Control. They're smart folks and they understand that stress is a serious issue. The Employee Assistance Program Office presentation to our staff gave us a good overview of what to look for, not only within ourselves but also what to be aware of in working with the teams in Mission Control.

I highly recommend more offices and organizations take advantage of the EAP outreach program."

"I realize my stress level is getting high when I have multiple tasks to do and cannot focus as well as I know I need to," said William Parsons, JSC deputy director. "That is when I know I must let go of things I have little or no control over. To manage it, I try to exercise regularly, either running, weight lifting, or golf, if time permits. I recognize there are certain things I can do to work the situation, and once I've done those things, I have to let the situation go."

So what do you do if you feel stress getting to you? There are several solutions, according to Jackie Reese, director of JSC's Employee Assistance Program, and Beth Hall, an industrial psychologist involved in JSC stress initiative. One of the simplest changes you can make is by simply adding some physical activity to your day.

"Outside research has shown that emotional health improves with aerobic activity," says Hall. "Furthermore, the added benefits you get from regular workouts such as power, agility, balance, speed, and neuromuscular coordination all increase morale and your job satisfaction, which are directly affected by stress."

"Center management has realized the toll stress can take on our employees and is actively seeking ways to reduce the risks associated with stress through our safety and health program," said Stacey Menard,

assistant to the director for Occupational Safety.

"In addition to the EAP's wonderful program and the Let's Stress, Less Stress campaign, we are focusing on behavior-based safety. This means finding ways to emphasize doing things safely at work, at home, and at play all the time. We've started with the STEP class, Safety Through Everyone's Participation, that gives students a few techniques to comfortably intervene when someone is about to commit an unsafe act. In the future, we hope to build a culture where we look out for each other's

safety so we can mitigate the role stress has in causing injuries."

If you need a more personal coping strategy or would like more information on coping with stress as a group, you can contact the JSC EAP, which provides workshops on an individual or organizational basis.

Reese and the EAP team can be reached at x36310. Other information on managing stress can be found on the Total Health tab of the Safety and Total Health Web site at www4.jsc.nasa.gov/safety/. ■

Symptoms of stress

- Irritability • Feeling easily overwhelmed • Persistent negative thinking • Chronic tension • Anxiety • Fatigue • Over-reacting
- Rashes • Aches, pains, nausea or other gastrointestinal symptoms • Headaches/migraines • Teeth grinding • Heart palpitations
- Restless agitation (*drumming fingers, etc.*) • Excessive perspiration • Feeling helpless or powerless • Feeling singled out or defensive

Bill Chill's 10 Best Stress Busters

- Take a deep breath • Change your scenery (*take a break*) • Plan ahead and set priorities (*clarify expectations and manage your time*)
- Ask for help • Balance work and home life • Get enough sleep • Exercise regularly and eat healthy foods • Put things in perspective
- Reward yourself and others • Seek encouragement from your friends • And relax – tomorrow is always a new day!